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As rift lingers with neighbors, Qatar ramps up air and seapower

Eric Knecht

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DOHA (Reuters) - Qatar will more than double its naval forces by 2025 as a massive new base comes online and it expands a national service program amid a protracted dispute with neighbors which it says requires greater self-reliance.



A C-17 plane used for airlift transport operations is seen in a hangar at Al-Udeid air base in Doha, Qatar November 26, 2018. Picture taken November 26, 2018. REUTERS/Stringer

Like its larger neighbors, the tiny but gas-rich state has used its massive wealth to launch a sweeping modernization of its military, pouring tens of billions of dollars into some of the world's most advanced weapons systems.

Qatari defense officials said the buildup has been planned for several years, and predates a Saudi Arabia-led political and economic boycott imposed since June 2017 over allegations that Doha supports terrorism - something which Qatar denies.

But they also said the tensions underscored the need to boost domestic capabilities while still hoping for an end to the dispute that has fractured a Gulf Arab bloc set up in 1981 to coordinate on political, economic and defense matters.

"You don't want to put all the burden on your friends and allies' shoulders. At some stage you have to stand up for yourself and defend yourself," state minister for defense Khalid al-Attiyah told reporters on a media tour of military facilities.

The row has eluded U.S. mediation efforts as Washington works on launching a proposed Middle East security alliance to act as a bulwark against Iran. Doha has said the new alliance faces a credibility risk as long as the boycott is in place.

The United States is allied to all six Gulf states. Qatar hosts Al-Udeid air base, the largest U.S. military facility in the region, while Bahrain is home to the Navy's Fifth Fleet.

Since the rift began Qatar has announced purchases of three different fighter jet systems, including 36 American F-15s, 12 French Rafale fighters and 24 Eurofighter Typhoon aircrafts.

Qatar's navy of fewer than 3,000 people is expected to balloon to 7,000 by 2025, a navy spokesman said. Construction for a sprawling new naval base south of Doha will begin early 2019.

The base is intended to accommodate 6,000 people and support some of the big-ticket recent purchases expected to arrive in the next two years, which include four Italian Corvettes and a behemoth amphibious landing platform dock.

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Analysts say the manpower challenge is enormous and the different systems, intended to shore up strategic alliances, will complicate training.

“They have to completely build up an air force and navy from scratch with very few Qatari nationals - where are they going to find the manpower to do this?” said Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

“If you compare this to Belgium or Sweden which has about 10 million people to choose from and have smaller armed forces in terms of equipment versus Qatar, this is going to be a very big task.”

Qatar has just over 300,000 citizens and relies on expats from countries like Pakistan and Sudan to fill out its military.

Defense officials said they are working to get as many Qataris into the armed forces as possible but declined to disclose the current number of Qataris or foreigners who serve.

A compulsory national service program was expanded this year to 12 months from three and will begin accepting Qatari females on a volunteer basis for the first time next year.

“We will not bring foreign pilots to fly our airplanes or drive our tanks or sail our warships,” said the state minister for defense, Attiyah.

The training challenge is front and center at Al Zaeem Air Academy, which aims to graduate a third more pilots this year and move to a larger new facility in 2019.

The first batch of six F-15s will arrive in early 2021 and use a “minimum of two US Air Force aircrew and up to 10 contract aircrew” until more Qatari pilots are trained, said Brigadier General Issa al-Mahannadi, who oversees the F-15 program.

Even as it builds out its own forces, Qatar has announced ambitious plans to invest in Al-Udeid base, a strategic launchpad for U.S. operations in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Qatari officials said they are finalizing plans for new living quarters, dining halls, and storage areas by 2022 to make the roughly 10,000 Americans there “more comfortable.”

“The idea is to make it a permanent base from an expeditionary one” said a military spokesman, who declined to comment on the total investment expected.

Reporting and writing by Eric Knecht; editing by Ghaida Ghantous

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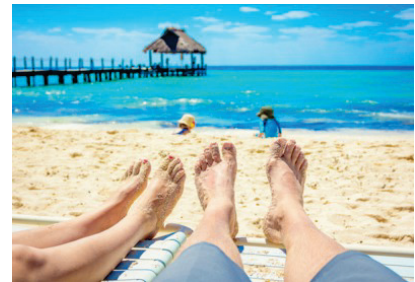
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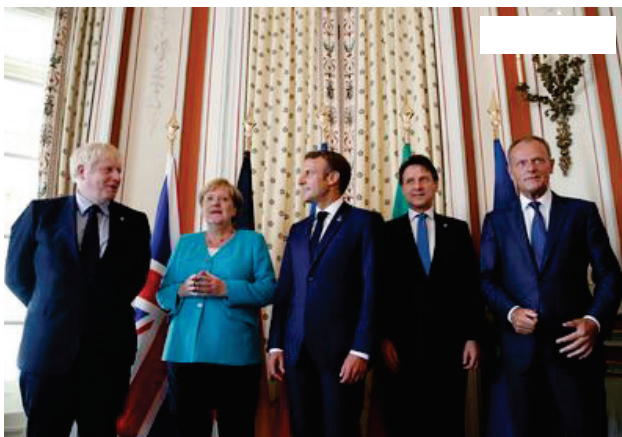
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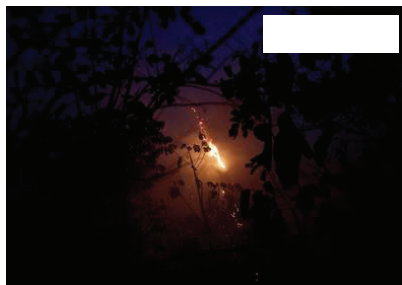
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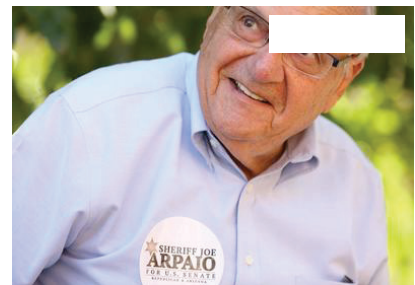
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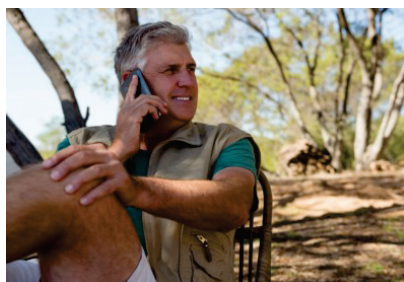
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